

Klawans, Stuart. "Moore's Dystopia." *Film Comment* Nov. 2002: 32-35.

MOORE'S DYSTOPIA

ON THE SURFACE, THE DIRECTOR'S LATEST DOCUMENTARY DIATRIBE IS ABOUT AMERICA AT ITS WORST. BUT ULTIMATELY, THE FILM REVEALS AS MUCH ABOUT THE MAN WHO MADE IT.

BY STUART KLAWANS



Before I delve into the cinematic intricacies of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*—cataloguing its modes of address, conducting an inventory of its materials and techniques, looking into the troubled question of its genre (documentary, essay film, agitprop, performance art?)—I have to tell you about the best score I ever rolled. It was a 226, racked up in Chicago in 1982, at the Gabby Hartnett Lanes.

The pins just kept flying that day; I don't know how else to explain it. To my *Nation* magazine colleague Marc Cooper, who bowls semi-pro, a 226 would be cause for morose self-criticism. ("You ever roll a 300?" I once asked him. In the pause that followed I could hear the sound of patience being frayed. "Yeah," he said finally. "A few times.") But my scores generally fall in the 160s—all right, the 150s. You can understand why, by the seventh frame, I was wondering if the lane was legit (had they set me up with kiddie pins?) and also why I felt so elated, so proud. My father was proud. We'd gone bowling that day just to hang out together.

Now, the name on the bowling alley was not insignificant. During his two decades as a major-league catcher, Gabby Hartnett was named National League MVP, led his team to the pennant as player-manager and hit the celebrated, twilight "Homer in the Gloamin'" that sent the Cubs into the 1938 World Series without anyone's actually seeing the ball leave

the field. Hartnett was not someone I had rooted for—he retired when I was only a year old, playing his last season in exile with the New York Giants—but he had been a big part of my father's adolescence, back when Wrigley Field was the home of winners. By rolling a respectable score before my father at the *Gabby Hartnett Lanes*, I knew I had proved myself.

If memory serves, there was also a rifle range at the Gabby Hartnett Lanes—which brings me back to Michael Moore and *Bowling for Columbine*.

This is one of Moore's tricks, always to be coming back to the subject. Another trick is to make the digressions autobiographical. No sooner does he announce his topic—in this case, the great enthusiasm of Americans for murdering one another with firearms—than he's recalling his childhood in Flint, Michigan, revisiting his hometown, reminding the audience that the two guys who bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and also one of the two guys who shot up Columbine High School, spent time around *Flint!* Most of us have this same habit of narrative egomania; when telling about September 11, we begin with what we ate that day for breakfast. In constructing a movie, Moore puts on this trait much as he wears his baseball cap; it's a sign, meant to establish a rapport with the audience by proving he's like us. He's just more playful about his self-involvement than we are, and more programmatic, too. And thanks to his research

team, he's also quicker to toss off curious facts—sports records, for example—that can turn into digressions of their own.

But we were talking about death by firearms. As you ought to know—Moore will fill you in, if you don't—the United States every year puts up spectacular numbers for gun murders. Why are our statistics so far out of whack with those of other nations?

As *Bowling for Columbine* begins, it seems as if Moore intends to give the standard liberal answer to this question: America's simply got too many guns and bullets knocking around. In the first of the movie's stunts—those performance pieces that are Moore's signature—he acquires a firearm just by dropping into a certain Michigan bank, which rewards new customers with a free rifle. "We're both a bank and a licensed firearms dealer," the clerk blandly informs him as he fills out the paperwork, ticking off a couple of boxes to certify that he's neither a convicted felon nor criminally insane. A moment later, he's brandishing his new rifle. "Don't you think it's a little dangerous, handing out guns in a bank?" Moore asks pleasantly. Then, still toting the weapon, he's off to a barbershop that stocks bullets next to the hair oil.

Draped with a cloth in the barber's chair, the big lug looks like King of the Carnival, with a rifle for his scepter. It's a funny image; but does Moore royally condescend to the subjects of his movie?

That's been one of the key questions about Moore ever since the release of *Roger & Me*, when Pauline Kael typed him as a put-down artist. The doubt would seem to become more urgent as Moore proceeds to his next set of interviews in *Bowling for Columbine*. Having demonstrated how easy it is to acquire a firearm (and, in so doing, to poke fun at a middle-aged woman who just happens to work as a bank clerk), he now goes off to target practice with the Michigan Militia.

They look geeky, and dangerous too, these civilian gun-lovers in their combat fatigues. Moore's interviews with them, though, turn out to be less than confrontational. "We're not racists, we're not extremists," one man insists almost plaintively on the soundtrack. "We're citizens." Nor are these people necessarily male supremacists. It seems that women, too, train with the militia. The point of owning weapons and learning to use them, says a mother, is simply to "take care of your family by yourself." While she says this, her little girl is toddling about in a playground of loaded weapons. All it would take from Moore would be one quip, or a single mocking camera angle, to turn the mother into a nut-job. But he restrains himself; he gives her every chance to be plausible.

In his eyes, perhaps, she is plausible. Despite the expectation he sets up for the audience in these first scenes, Moore eventually reveals that he doesn't think gun ownership *in itself* is a problem. Nor does he blame America's peculiar murder rate on violent movies, bloody video games, dangerous pop music, soaring divorce rates, endemic inner-city poverty, or the frontier past. As he moves into the main body of *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore tests each of these hypothetical causes by subjecting it to cross-cultural analysis—as if he were a social scientist, only funnier. Violent history? He tosses out some old newsreel footage about Germany. Troubled families? He shows us an English newsdealer, hawking tabloids at the time of Fergie's divorce. Video games? Here we are in the homeland of the damn things. Japan. A brisk bit of montage, a factoid or two recited on the soundtrack, and Moore makes his case that Americans



Arms and the man: Michael Moore, armed and dangerous—or at least pissed off—taking it to the streets



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have no monopoly on social ills, real or purported. We don't even have a monopoly on gun-love; Canadians keep as many firearms lying around as we do. So how come we shoot each other, and they don't?

We come back to the subject: the events of April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, at the "Home of the Rebels," Columbine High School. The sequences about that day's murders make up the heart, in the full sense, of Moore's picture. Here is a partial anatomy of what goes into that heart:

1. An interview in which Moore mocks his subject—a salesman of home security systems—until the man mentions Columbine High School and chokes up. Moore tries to comfort him.

2. Videos from surveillance cameras, showing the massacre in the high school library, combined with recordings of emergency phone calls and on-the-spot news reports.

3. A clunky business-promotion video, put out by Littleton's boosters.

4. Footage of Charlton Heston addressing a National Rifle Association rally, held in nearby Denver within days of the massacre.

5. Footage of a demonstration in Denver against the NRA, featuring a speech by the father of one of the slain students.

6. A montage sequence, retelling the story of U.S. aggression against other nations, 1953–1999, with the attack on the World Trade Center as a coda. (Although Moore takes care along the way to identify the moment when the U.S. began to train and arm Osama bin Laden, this is to end a digression with a digression.)

7. An interview with area native Matt Stone, co-creator of *South Park*, who sits at the In-N-Out Burger explaining why it sucks to be a teenager in Littleton.

8. An animation in *South Park* style, giving Moore's view of U.S. history.

9. A clunky marketing video, put out

by a company that sells metal detectors.

10. An interview with three girls who took a bowling class with the murderers, for high school credit. The boys didn't do well in their studies.

As even a quick glance down this list will reveal, some of the material is included because it's necessary, and some because Moore couldn't resist; some is ridiculous, and some is awful in its solemnity; some is surprisingly relevant, some a little irrelevant, and some unavoidable. The list also helps define some of the modes in which Moore addresses us. He sets himself apart from the people he's interviewing, as if he were winking back at the audience, encouraging us to jeer. He engages himself emotionally with an on-screen subject, while seeming to ignore the camera. He removes himself completely from the image and soundtrack, to let the material speak for itself. He imposes himself on the material, sometimes by adding corny music (*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, the

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military march from the *Ode to Joy*), sometimes by commenting on the footage in arch sincerity. ("Just a typical day in America.") All this, and I haven't even mentioned Moore's knack for parody.

My point is, a filmmaker's brain is at work beneath that baseball cap—a brain in which skill, talent, and polemical intent maintain an uneasy balance. Even Moore's biggest fans, like me, sometimes get woozy at his not-quite-controlled shifts in tone. Witness the false moment toward the end of *Bowling for Columbine* when he places at Charlton Heston's door a memorial photograph of six-year-old Kayla Rolland, shot to death in her grammar school by another six-year-old. I have no doubt that Moore's grief and anger are genuine; but the gesture was planned, and he isn't a good enough actor to disguise that fact. Bad enough that the rhetorician in Moore, appealing nakedly to the audience, temporarily gets the better of the artist. Worse still, Kayla Rolland doesn't seem to be the focus of this little drama; it's all about the sensitivity of Michael Moore.

So we come back yet again to the subject, which is autobiography. Despite all the raucous laughter that he elicits in *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore is working on difficult and personal emotional terrain. He's concerned with fear and shame: the fear that white Americans have, generally, historically felt for black men, and the shame that too many kids feel (sometimes with disastrous consequences) when they're branded as losers-for-life. As a sociologist, Moore proposes that these endemic emotions, especially fear, are the causal factor behind our murder statistics, *when combined with easy access to firearms and ammo*. (In other words, it's a bad idea for people who are as jumpy as Americans to have a lot of guns lying around.) As a polemicist, Moore argues that we ought to do something, now, about the miseries behind our society's dangerous feelings. As an autobiographer, Moore speaks with deep conviction about those wounds that Richard Sennett called "the hidden injuries of class"—but only when he tacitly uses someone else as a stand-in. He can be heart-breaking about the six-year-old boy who killed Kayla Rolland. About himself, he's best when he's King of the Carnival.

Maybe that puts *Bowling for Columbine* into the category of the old B-budget laughing-screaming movies, like Roger Corman's *How to Make a Monster*: mon-

tag-o-ramas of uncertain acting and stock footage, with all sorts of personal messages worked in. Think of how great it would be if America still had its drive-ins, and teenagers could sit in their cars watching *Bowling for Columbine*!

Since that won't happen, we're left to answer two questions under current moviegoing conditions.

First, how good a picture is *Bowling for Columbine*? In answer, I will point out that the closest thing it's got to a dull moment comes during an interview with

Marilyn Manson. That's pretty good.

Second, how unfair is Moore's method of argument? That's a tougher call—but as a born Cubs fan, I will make it anyway. When you're playing for the pennant, and an umpire *thinks* the ball has sailed over the fence, you don't ask for a do-over in better lighting conditions. That rule was good enough for Gabby Hartnett. It's good enough for Michael and me.

Stuart Klawans is the film critic for The Nation.

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